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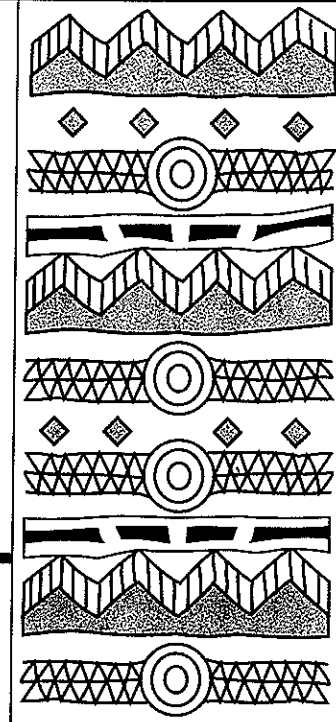
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INTRODUCTION

Sweet Summer




Born in 1950, Bebe Moore Campbell grew up in two places, in two different worlds, North and South. During the winter she lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with her mother and grandmother and attended an integrated school, Logan Elementary. But summers she spent in North Carolina with her father, surrounded by her southern relatives. From her college-educated mother, Moore learned to be the best she could be. From her dad, who had been paralyzed in a car accident, she learned about determination and dignity.

Bebe Campbell is a journalist and lives in Los Angeles. In the following excerpt from her book, she tells about an incident in school that heightened her self-awareness as a young African American.

from *Sweet Summer*

by Bebe Moore Campbell

 The blare of Monday's late bell jolted the last vestiges of torpor¹ from my bones. In September I had entered 5A. In January 1961 I skipped 5B and went to the sixth grade. Most of my fifth-grade classmates accompanied me to Miss Tracy's room. The Philadelphia school system, in order to end midyear graduations, had abandoned the A/B grade levels. In January most students were skipped into the next grade, although some were retained.

Miss Tracy nodded her head and held out her hands, letting her palms face her students; she drew her hands upward. I rose with the rest of the class and placed my hand over my heart, shifting my weight from foot to foot and staring straight ahead at the bulletin boards, which were still covered with red and green construction-paper Santa Clauses and Christmas trees. I acted as if I were speaking, but when the rest of the class said, "I pledge allegiance to the flag . . ." I only mouthed the words. Months before, Reverend Lewis had told the congregation that Negroes in the South were being beaten by white people because they wanted to integrate lunch counters at drugstores. A few weeks earlier, while Mommy, Nana, Michael and I were sitting in the living room watching

1. torpor (TAWR-puhr) *n.* sluggishness

television, the show was interrupted; the announcer showed colored people trying to march and white policemen coming after them with giant German shepherds.

"Now you know that ain't right," Nana had said angrily.

The day after I saw that news bulletin I was saying the Pledge of Allegiance in class and right in the middle of it my head started hurting so bad I thought it was gonna fall off and I felt so mad I wanted to punch somebody. I didn't want to say the pledge, that was the problem. I was afraid not to say anything, so I just kept opening my mouth, but nothing came out. After that I only pretended to say the words. If they were gonna sic² dogs on Negroes then I wasn't gonna say some pledge and I wasn't gonna sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" neither. Not for them, I wasn't.

Sixth grade was rough. In the first place, I didn't like Miss Tracy. None of my friends liked her either. She was the meanest teacher I ever had, so full of rules and ultimatums.³ No talking. No erasures on spelling tests. No going to the bathroom except at recess. No this, no that. Always use her name when addressing her. No, Miss Frankenstein. Yes, Miss Frankenstein. She sent Linda out of the room just because she said "Excuse me" to me when she dropped my spelling paper. I mean . . . really. I could see Linda through the small glass window in the door, standing outside in the hall crying while we graded the spelling papers. Causing my best friend's tears was enough for me to start hating Miss Tracy, but I had other reasons.

It was a year of hot breathing and showdowns at Logan. We were sixth-graders, on our way out the door and feeling our oats every step of the way. . . . We were embarrassed; we were proud. But the little band of Negroes at Logan felt something more than puberty.

2. **sic** (SIHK) *v.* to urge to attack

3. **ultimatums** (ul-tuh-MAY-tuhmz) *n.pl.* final statements of demand that threaten serious penalties if not met

Fierce new rhythms—bam de bam de *bam bam bam!*—were welling up inside us. We were figuring things out. At home in the living room with our parents we watched the nightly news—the dogs, the hoses and nightsticks against black flesh—and we seethed; we brought our anger to school. The rumor flew around North Philly, West Philly and Germantown that Elvis Presley⁴ had said, “All colored people can do for me is buy my records and shine my shoes.” In the schoolyard and the classroom we saw the sea of white surrounding us and we drew in closer. We’d been fooling ourselves. It didn’t matter how capable we were: it was *their* school, *their* neighborhood, *their* country, *their* planet. We were the outsiders and they looked down on us. Our bitterness exploded like an overdue time bomb.

“Miss Tracy doesn’t like Negroes,” I announced to Carol and Linda when we sat under the poplar tree at recess.

Linda got excited. “How do you know that?”

“You ever notice how she never picks us to do anything? And she’s always putting our names on the board for talking and she doesn’t ever put David’s name on the board and all he does is run his mouth . . .”

“And try to act like his Elvis Presley,” Carol added. “Miss Tracy’s always calling us ‘you people.’ And remember that time she sent Wallace to the office when that white boy stepped on his foot?”

“That doesn’t mean she doesn’t like Negroes,” Linda said doubtfully. Carol and I looked at each other and shook our heads. What a baby.

“Well, what does it mean, then?” I asked Linda sarcastically.

“It means she doesn’t like the Negroes in her room,” Carol said dryly.

4. Elvis Presley (EHL-vihs PREHS-lee) (1935–1977) an American rock- and-roll singer who greatly influenced popular culture

The skirmishes were slight affairs, nothing anyone could really put a finger on. A black boy pushed a white boy in line. A black girl muttered "cracker" when a white girl touched her accidentally. One afternoon when David was walking past our tree Carol yelled, "Elvis Presley ain't doing nothing but imitating colored people. And he can't even sing." David looked at her in astonishment. She put her hands on her hips and declared, "I ain't buying his records and I ain't shining his shoes neither!"

"Boys and girls, you're growing up," Miss Tracy said to the class one afternoon. Yes, we were. Something hot and electric was in the air.

The winter before I graduated from Logan Elementary, there was a disturbance in my class. Miss Tracy was absent and we had a substitute, a small, pretty woman named Mrs. Brown. She had taught us before, and all of us liked her because if we finished our work she would let us play hangman. We were spelling that day, going through our list of words in the usual, boring way. Mrs. Brown picked someone and the person had to go to the blackboard and write a sentence using the spelling word. We had three more words to go and I'd already been picked, so my interest in the whole process was waning. Hurry up, I thought. I was only half listening when I heard Mrs. Brown ask Clarence, who was wearing his everyday uniform, a suit and a tie, to stop talking. Clarence turned a little in his chair and frowned. He continued to talk.

"Did you hear me, Clarence?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"No."

Everybody turned to stare at Clarence and to check him for any outward signs of mental instability. Nobody talked back to teachers at Logan. Mrs. Brown coughed for a full minute, then stood up and asked Clarence to go to the board. Her voice was sharp. Clarence slouched in his seat. "No," he said almost lazily. Nobody breathed. Mrs. Brown said he would have to go to the principal's office if he wouldn't behave. All of us in class shuddered as if we

were one body. Was Clarence crazy? I thought of my own dark trek to the principal's office. Nobody wanted to visit Jennie G. Clarence glared at Mrs. Brown so forcefully that she turned away from him. Clarence said slowly, "Later for the principal. Later for you. Later for all y'all white people. Send me to the principal. That don't cut no cheese with me."

Everything happened fast after that, after it was clear that Clarence had lost his mind. Mrs. Brown quickly dispatched one of the boys to bring Mr. Singer, who appeared moments later at the door. Mrs. Brown conferred with Mr. Singer hastily and then he took Clarence by the arm and ushered him out of the room. Clarence did a diddy-bop hoodlum⁵ stroll and showed not one bit of remorse as he left.

As soon as he was gone, Mrs. Brown leaned back in her chair and put the sides of her hands to her temples. The small diamond on her finger glittered in the sunlight. "Why would he say such awful things to me? Why?" she demanded, looking at the class. "Why?" she repeated, her eyes now focusing on every dark face in the class as if we alone knew the answer. Everyone was looking at Linda, Carol, Wallace, and me, I realized. And they were . . . scared. Their eyes asked: Are you like Clarence? Are you angry too? Mrs. Brown tried to start the lesson again, but nobody was concentrating. Linda, Carol and I looked at each other cautiously. It was silently agreed: we wouldn't explain anything.

"That nigger's crazy!" Wallace whispered as we filed outside for recess. There was no more that could be said.

In the schoolyard, in our compact circle, we whooped like renegades. "He sure told Mrs. Brown off!" we exclaimed, falling all over each other in our excitement. "Later for all y'all white people," we repeated that single line, giggling as we slapped each other's thighs. I thought not of the dogs and the nightsticks, but of the ponytails

5. hoodlum (HÖÖD-luhm) *n.* a tough, often aggressive youngster

and poodle skirts on *Bandstand*,⁶ bobbing and swishing off beat, twisting and turning so happily. Carol, Linda and I nodded at each other. The single vein of anger that was growing in us all had been acknowledged this day. We had a crazy nigger in our midst, close enough for comfort.

Clarence, of course, was suspended. A much more subdued boy returned to school flanked by his mother and father. The grapevine said that Jennie G. had said sternly to his parents, "We will not tolerate that kind of rude, uncivilized behavior at Logan. Is that clear?" When it was all over, Clarence had to apologize to Mrs. Brown and tell her he didn't know what on earth had gotten into him. But I knew.

I turned eleven in February. My father drove to Philadelphia to celebrate, and he took my mother and me to dinner at Horn & Hardart⁷ because the aisles were wide enough for his wheelchair. After we ate I got behind Daddy and pushed him, and we all went around the corner to the movies. The usher stared when Daddy came in, and said, "Now you aren't gonna block up the aisle, are you?"

Mommy looked straight ahead past the man. Daddy stuck out his chin a little, laughed and said, "Where would you like me to sit, mister?" I could tell he was mad. We ended up sitting in the back. Daddy hopped into the aisle chair and folded up his chair and leaned it against the outside of his seat. I sat next to him and every time something funny or exciting happened, I squeezed Daddy's hand until I was sure he wasn't angry anymore.

We came straight home after the movie. After my father parked the car in front of our house, my parents

6. *Bandstand* a reference to the television show "American Bandstand," hosted by Dick Clark and especially popular in the 1950s and early 1960s

7. *Horn & Hardart* (HAWRN & HAHN-dahrt) a popular, inexpensive restaurant chain where customers took food from small compartments that opened after coins were put into slots

handed me a small box. Inside was a thin Timex watch with a black strap. I gasped with happiness and excitement. I was sitting between my mother and father, admiring my watch, basking in their adoration. I'd forgotten all about the usher. This is the way it should always be, I thought. When my mother said it was time for us to go in I said, "Kiss Daddy."

Mommy paused for a moment. My father looked awkward. He leaned toward my mother. She pecked him on the cheek.

"No. Not like that," I chided them. "Kiss on the lips."

They obeyed me and gave each other another brief, chaste peck. Why couldn't they kiss better than that? Mr. Johnston wasn't my mother's boyfriend anymore. He hadn't been around for several months. Why couldn't she love my daddy again? My mother and father didn't look at each other as they moved away.

I wanted magic from them, a kiss that would ignite their love, reunite all three of us. As my father drove off I looked down at my watch and stared at the minute hand ticking away.

Miss Tracy worked our butts off until just before graduation. She assigned us a health report and an arithmetic project, and we had to write a creative story using all the spelling words we'd had since January. On top of everything else, she gave us a book report.

Miss Tracy took our class to the school library and told us to find the book we wanted to do a report on and to make sure we told her what it was. I turned the library inside out trying to find a book I liked. The problem was, I'd read all the good stuff. So I asked Miss Tracy if I could get my book from the public library; she said that was fine with her.

Michael, Mommy and I went to the downtown library one Sunday after church. I searched in the young adult section for an interesting title. Then I went to where the new books were displayed and picked up one with a picture of an earnest-looking black boy in the foreground and a small town in the background. I started leafing

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through some of the pages and I couldn't put it down. The book was about Negroes trying to win their rights in a small southern town and how they struggled against bad white people and were helped by good ones. There weren't any bad Negroes and that fit my mood perfectly. As I was reading it, the thought hit me instantly: Miss Tracy wouldn't want me to do my report on *South Town*.⁸ She'd tell me it wasn't "suitable." I decided I wouldn't tell Miss Tracy; I'd just do the report.

The day I stood in front of the class to give my report, my mouth was dry and my hands were moist. "My book is called *South Town*," I said, holding the book up so everybody could see the cover. The whole class got quiet as they studied the black boy's serious face; Miss Tracy's head jerked up straight. "This was a very exciting, dramatic book, and I liked it a lot, because every summer I live in a place exactly like the town that was described in this book," I said, my voice rising. I had my entire book report memorized and after a while everything came easily. I walked across the room, raising my hand for dramatic flair, feeling like a bold renegade telling my people's struggle to the world. I whispered when I described a sad part of the book. I finished with a flourish. "I recommend this book for anyone interested in the struggle for Negroes to gain equal rights in America. Thank you."

As soon as I sat down I could feel Miss Tracy's breath on my neck. You didn't ask my permission to do that report," she said. Her hazel eyes were as cold as windowpanes in February. I had forgotten how terrifying Miss Tracy's rage could be. What if she gave me an F? Or sent me to the principal's office? Oh, Lordy.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice drained of dramatic flair. I didn't feel like such a bold renegade anymore. I was scared.

8. *South Town* an award-winning novel, published in 1958, by social worker and author Lorenz Graham

Miss Tracy turned away without saying a word. Three days later she returned the reports. At the bottom in the right-hand corner of mine there was a small B. Emblazoned across the top in fierce red ink were the words: "Learn to follow directions."

I took the report home and gave it to my mother who, of course, asked, "What directions didn't you follow?" I told her the whole story; then I held my breath. The last thing I wanted to hear was, "Bebe, I'm disappointed in you." Mommy didn't say that; she just looked at Miss Tracy's comments again. Then she said, "Sometimes you eat the bear; sometimes the bear eats you," which sounded kinda strange coming from her, because Mommy wasn't one for a lot of down-home sayings. She put the report in the bottom drawer of her bureau, where she kept my school papers and grades. "Don't worry about it," Mommy said.

Three weeks later I sat on the stage of the school auditorium in the green chiffon dress my mother made me, underneath it a brand-new Littlest Angel bra identical to the one Linda's mother had bought her. The straps cut into my shoulders, but my mind was too crowded with thoughts for me to feel any pain. As Nana, Mommy, Michael and Pete watched, I walked across the stage to receive my certificate. Pete took pictures. I wanted my father to be there, but at least I could show him the photos.

Two weeks later I kissed Mommy, Nana and Michael good-bye and climbed into my father's newest acquisition, a blue Impala convertible. "BebbebebebebebebeMoore," Daddy sang out when he saw me, then, "I guess you're getting too big for that stuff, huh?" His eyes were questioning, searching. I didn't know what to say, afraid that if I said yes, Daddy would never again make a song of my name, and if I said no, he'd think of me as a baby forever. So I leaned my head back against the seat and smiled. The wind was in my face and I was heading toward a North Carolina summer that would deliver a heartbreak and a promise.

AFTER YOU READ

Exchanging Backgrounds and Cultures

1. What contradiction did Bebe Campbell see between saying the Pledge of Allegiance in school and the events she heard about or saw on the news?
2. Why did Bebe choose *South Town* for a book report? What does her choice tell you about her feelings about herself?
3. What importance do you think the incidents in this selection had for the author?

What Do You Think?

Which part of this account was most meaningful to you? Why?

Experiencing Nonfiction

One of the challenges of growing up is getting adults to listen to you and acknowledge that your thoughts, opinions, and feelings are important. For Bebe Campbell and her African American classmates, this was doubly difficult in a racially divided society. Write a brief autobiographical account about a conflict in your life that helped you understand yourself better.

Optional Activity Bebe Campbell felt like an outsider in her school. Many young people, at some time or another and for a variety of reasons, feel as though they are on the outside looking in. Write a brief essay—autobiographical or general—that shows or discusses the effects that exclusion has on people.